

Old Guard soldiers adjust to life at sea

Story and photos by Spc. Eric M. McKeeby

Over the past six weeks, Spc. Mac B. Cole has suffered several sleep-related injuries.

Cole, an infantryman from Bravo Company, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, "The Old Guard," has been aboard the USS Wasp for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa tactical missions and training since mid-April. Since boarding the ship soldiers have had the opportunity to broaden their infantry skills and their ability to adapt to living in atypical and, occasionally, uncomfortable settings.

Among the living conditions to which the soldiers have had to adjust is sleeping in tightly-squeezed racks of beds, supported by sheets of steel and molded to the side of walls in the ships' berthing areas.

Standing at six feet one inch, Cole is average height for the group of soldiers, who each stand five feet and ten inches or taller. Like many of his peers, Cole is awakened each night when his head smacks either the bottom of the bed inches above his nose or the wall to which the bed is mounted.

"Sleeping spaces are extremely small. I bang my head probably five or six times a night," Cole, of Huntsville, Texas, said.

Sgt. Rudolf Burgherr III, a medic with the unit, said the beds, which he estimates to be five feet ten inches long, 2 feet wide and 18 inches high, have been a problem for some soldiers, including himself.

"Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and think that I am in a coffin. Some of the guys who are six-foot-two or three are having a bit tougher of a time," Burgherr, an Alanson, Mich., native, said.

"I have had an awful lot of aspirin disappearing lately," Burgherr added.

Over the past several weeks, the soldiers have taken part in an intense training schedule to supplement and support their tactical missions on the ship. Training for the unit has included various fast rope rappel rehearsals, numerous live fire ranges and elaborate unarmed combat training.

Sgt. 1st Class Fred L. Silhol, IV, said the training

has been invaluable for the soldiers and leaves them at a skilled advantage.

"We've increased our marksmanship skills immensely and soldiers in my platoon alone have probably fired more rounds in six weeks than some soldiers in the Military District of Washington do in their entire careers," Silhol said.

Silhol, of Westmonte, NJ, also said the infantrymen aboard the Wasp are the only Old Guard platoon certified to fast

rope, a crucial method of insertion used when required by time or landing zone constraints.

"It is definitely a skill that could be used in our task as protectors of the nation's capital," Silhol said.

Silhol acknowledges the path to accomplishing training objectives has been wrought with environmental challenges for the land-loving infantrymen.

In addition to taut sleeping quarters, Silhol said he has had to adapt to the frequent use of the ship's intercom. The intercom, with numerous speakers placed throughout the Wasp, is employed to forcefully announce messages ranging from pie-in-the-face contests to battle drills in day and night.

"It's like being at K-Mart, all the announcements come over the intercoms," Silhol said.

Other soldiers in the company also find comparisons between the intercom system and consumer life.

"I hear what sounds like Rice-A-Roni commercials with a 'ding ding' from a bell," Pfc. Gabriel Au Buchon said.

"I was once downstairs talking to sailors during an Asian American awareness program and, all of a sudden, they had a 'Man Over Board' on the intercom, and I realized it wasn't a drill. Suddenly, all of these people started running like 'The Poseidon Adventure.' I made my way upstairs," Au



(Clockwise from top left) Spc. Brandon A. Baker, Pfc. Michael Mullins, Pvt. Nicolas Turner and Pvt. Benjamin Snadon, infantrymen in Bravo Company, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, "The Old Guard," listen as volleyball tournament results are announced over the intercom systems of the USS Wasp. With speakers all over the ship, the intercoms are used to announce everything from pie-in-the-face contests to wake-up calls. Adjusting to the intercoms, some Old Guard soldiers have compared being on the ship to being at K-Mart.

Buchon, a Doe Run, Mo. native, said.

Another adaptation, Silhol said, has been the low-tech nature of recreation and communication on the ship.

"The Navy is more dependant on low-tech Morale, Welfare and Recreation like board games, card games and an awfully slow internet. We have more services available to us on land than at sea. Their whole life support system is a 30-year-old ship," Silhol said.

Burgherr said the rocking motion of the ship, exacerbated when the Wasp hits turbulent waters, has been an occasional burden for soldiers. While he said he has personally acclimated to the vessel's regular tilts and turns, he said rough sailing still shocks the occasional soldier.

"One soldier said he was on a treadmill at the gym. It was a rough day outside, a lot of waves. He said that after one particularly big wave, he fell off a treadmill and into a wall," Burgherr said.

The infantrymen said dining on the ship differs from traditional army "chow."

"Nutrition wise, they have carbs and then fat. The food lacks good flavor," Au Buchon said.

Burgherr said the differences in quality between Army and Navy chow are rooted in the way each service runs its dining facilities.

"Army food comes from pretty much the same food suppliers as on the ship, but if the Army cooks were to mess something up, a higher ranking person would jump down their throat. They have the fear of God in them. In addition, a lot of Army posts have civilian contractors preparing food, so that also improves the quality of food," Burgherr said.

Cole, who said he misses fresh fruit and vegetables, said he continues to face difficulties appreciating the confined spaces of the ship. As infantry-



Spc. Timothy Elzea crams into his bed in the berthing area of the USS Wasp. At six feet, three inches tall, Elzea, like many of his fellow Old Guard soldiers has difficulty sleeping without hitting his head in the night. Tight sleeping spaces are among the challenges the Army infantry unit has faced since arriving on the ship in mid-April.

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